How to Be Good at Telling Others to Be Good: A Case for Epilogue Storytelling

Keywords

Methods in political theory, Ideal Theory, Nonideal Theory, Black Feminist Thought.

Storytelling.

Abstract

The first part of this article looks at the methods we use in ideal theory to achieve a principles-first approach – *idealisations*, *thought experiments* and *reflective equilibrium* - and the criticisms this brings from nonideal theorists. Specifically, the criticisms I focus on are the issues with *translating ideals* into reality, thus questioning the use of ideal theory, and the more extreme claim that ideal theory methods create *principles built upon falsehoods*. I then bring another perspective to bear upon the issues of ideal theorising: Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Epistemology* and how it problematizes a position of the abstracted, *'detached observer'* (Collins, 2000, p. 19). The conclusion to these criticisms is to propose an addition to the way we do ideal theory – *epilogue storytelling.* I explain what this is and how it can connect to existing schools of thought regarding normative guidance, focussing briefly on moral sentimentalism.

Ideal Theory Methods and its Nonideal Critics

Idealisations, Thought Experiments, and Reflective Equilibrium

In ideal theory we 'work out the principles of justice that should govern a society' (Robeyns, 2008, p. 343). Subsequently, much of the work about those principles are in an idealised form, where we only discuss their merit in isolation from a real context. This is informed by the idea that idealisation is supposed to provide us with 'systematic grasp' of the 'more pressing problems' (Rawls, 1999, p. 31) in our respective societies. In this way, ideal theory helps us reframe existing issues from a point of view that starts from a principle, which can inform action, behaviour and perhaps even policies. Insofar as ideal theory is normative then, as Zofia Stemplowska asserts, it 'must contain (normative) principles, that is, normative statements

expressing position(s) on one or more values'. She adds a further distinction to the idea of something normative, clearing up some potential vagueness over the term and the intentions of our work: 'Some normative theories, however, will contain an additional type of output, which I will refer to as recommendations. Recommendations are specific proposals for actions, policies, and/or institutional reforms that are able to achieve improvements as measured by the specified principle(s)' (Stemplowska, 2008, p. 323). According to Adam Swift, it is 'for the empirical, descriptive/explanatory, social scientific disciplines to (try to) tell us what states of the world can indeed be realized', but it is 'for philosophy to tell us which of those states and means of achieving them are better and worse than one another' (Swift, 2008, p. 369). The role of ideal theory in this then is to serve as a 'mythical *paradise island*'. It informs us on how we ought to behave in the face of personal interests and how our world should be. We 'dream of going there and ask ourselves how we could get there, and in which direction we should be moving in order to eventually reach Paradise Island' (Robeyns, 2008, p. 345). Ideal theory is not just ambitious, but demanding, for by definition before we can consider a society just, our chosen principles of justice 'should be met' (Robeyns, 2008, p. 343).

Idealisations are 'forms of abstraction' that 'reduce the number of parameters' any principle has to contend with. In effect, we simplify 'some aspects of society' or 'persons' in order to focus on the correctness of any principle under consideration: to 'get a grip on the complex set of questions related to it' (Robeyns, 2008, p. 353), for we must know what principle is best prior to applying it to any reality, and reality is a distraction in the initial search. Since Rawls, ideal theorists have had to consider the extent to which they will apply 'strict compliance'. Essentially, how far they will assume that the principles of justice under consideration are complied with in our theorising, or simply put, how idealised we want our idealisations to be. In a *Theory of Justice,* when Rawls initially went in search of 'the principles of justice that would regulate a well-ordered society' he presumed that everybody in it was

acting ‘justly’ and would ‘do his part in upholding just institutions’ (Rawls, 1999, p. 8). In other words, there is no cheating the institutions that will guarantee the principles we propose. Once we have found our guiding moral value, there is no serious consideration given to the possibility of it being avoided, deflected or ignored. In contrast, ‘partial compliance theory’ takes such misbehaviour into account and focusses on the ‘principles that govern how we are to deal with injustice’. In this Rawls includes punishment, ‘just war’ and civil disobedience (Rawls, 1999, p. 8). Thus, ‘when defending and justifying *ideal* principles of justice, we assume full compliance with those principles’ (Robeyns, 2008, p. 343), for it is the principles that equip us with the tools we need to resolve urgent problems in our societies. Having a full understanding of them is our priority. Therefore, this is in fact a kind of theorising through escape, in two ways. First, because we turn to a guiding principle theorised independently of the problem: the principle itself is a temporary escape, an abstracted viewing point. Second, because in order to find that principle in its most perfect, ideal form, we construct an environment that is simplified, and so removed, from the reality surrounding the problem.

Thought experiments are often a vehicle for idealisations as they construct that environment, but they are also for normative force. They present us with an imaginary situation and ask us to make an evaluation over which course of action to take. In political theory we can thus understand thought experiments as ‘involving making a judgement about what would be the case morally if the particular state of affairs described in the imaginary scenario were actual’ (Walsh, 2007, p. 178). This is something Rawls did to great effect in *A Theory of Justice*, where we are asked to decide on a legitimate inequality gap in society, with the added complication of not knowing our own position in that society. A ‘veil of ignorance’ (Rawls, 1999, pp. 118-123) effectively puts us into what Rawls calls the ‘original position’ (Rawls, 1999, pp. 15-19). In this way, the ‘effects of specific contingencies’ which ‘put men at odds’ and encourage us to ‘exploit social and natural circumstances’ to our own advantage are

nullified (Rawls, 1999, p. 118) and what is just can potentially come to the fore. So, when Rawls invokes this 'veil of ignorance' thought experiment, he does so to take us to a place where our moral judgement would result in an increase in inequality only on the condition that it would benefit the least well-off. This is ideal theorising because it suspends the knowledge of 'particular facts'. Those general things that are given are also idealisations: the parties to the thought experiment 'know that their society is subject to the circumstances of justice and whatever that implies' (Rawls, 1999, p. 119). Another example is G. A. Cohen's use of thought experiments in *Why Not Socialism?* Here we are asked to remove the particular details or 'contingencies' to the extent that initially we are not even engaged in the planning of society or ideologies that inform its structure. We are on a camping trip. Again, it begins from idealisations: 'there is no hierarchy among us; our common aim is that each of us should have a good time…We have facilities with which to carry out our enterprise…as is usual on camping trips, we avail ourselves of those facilities collectively' (Cohen, 2009, p. 14). It is not my intent to say that thought experiments are defined by engaging in idealisations. For sure, they can be dystopian, post-apocalyptic or very cynical about human behaviour. Equally, they can involve real events, just in an imaginary setting. Therefore, as Kimberley Brownlee and Zofia Stemplowska claim in 'Thought Experiments', they are not exclusively and 'not purely abstract or formal operations of thought' (Stemplowska & Brownlee, 2017, p. 25). In ideal theory however, we do tend to use them in this way. Thought experiments are perhaps better understood as 'simple' and 'complex' rather than idealised (Stemplowska & Brownlee, 2017, p. 28), where the 'simple' does often include idealisations, especially in ideal theory. Clearly some further categorisation is needed.

Adrian Walsh provides four distinct ways in which thought experiments are used. First of all, we can use them as 'clarificatory devices' (Walsh, 2007, p. 178). Here thought experiments help us to see when we have conflated two principles that are actually distinctive

and different. This helps us deal with ‘complicated normative issues’ (Walsh, 2007, p. 179). Walsh gives Plato’s Ring of Gyges as an example – the point of a ring in which we can appear invisible is not just to agree that we should act justly with such an item, but to clarify whether to do so is a ‘rule of prudence or as a fundamental moral obligation’ (Walsh, 2007, p. 179). Second, thought experiments are useful for ‘reimagining’: where we ‘use a thought experiment as a device to reframe or refocus a debate’. This is an effective tool when there is ‘over-familiarity with an ethical issue’ (Walsh, 2007, p. 179). Many cases may come to mind here, such as Brexit and concepts of democracy and sovereignty. A remain / leave opposition seems to have become so entrenched that ‘over-familiarity’ with the dispute prevents us from reflecting on the problem effectively. This is what Rawls attempts with the ‘veil of ignorance’. Defamiliarising arguments about inequality and the welfare state was probably a good idea: in the very least, such tools can ‘reopen the debate’ when they become stale (Walsh, 2007, p. 179). When thought experiments work in this way, they can also be very effective at countering irrelevant points in a discussion. Walsh claims that philosophical arguments can often be ‘sidetracked by debates over irrelevant legal, historical or technical detail’. This is a very contentious claim and one that nonideal theorists like Charles Mills would probably dispute. However, the example Walsh gives can help us see the reason for this claim: when discussing the use of weapons of mass destruction, the historical event of Hiroshima does not necessarily translate to a ‘normative legitimacy’ for their use today (Walsh, 2007, p. 179). So, in fact, thought experiments are not there to replace historical events that may parallel, but to stand in for them when they do not. Third, thought experiments can be used as ‘counter-examples’. Benjamin Constant’s famous ‘murderer at the door’ thought experiment comes to mind. Although this perhaps misunderstood Kant’s point – that when we cannot follow the ‘categorical imperative’ (Kant, 1970, p. 155) fully and try to evade it we are least paying homage to it, thus still reinforcing its place as a universal. Perhaps in that case the thought

experiment then serves to highlight how removed categorical imperatives tend to be from actual life. If a murderer comes to your door asking the whereabouts of your friend, you are hardly going to have the mind, inclination or even concern that you must at least pay homage to it. Finally, Walsh claims that thought experiments can act as 'intuition pumps'. Here he means that we can come to some generalised conclusion or principle from our 'reaction to a thought experiment' (Walsh, 2007, p. 179). So, our interactions with the 'veil of ignorance' may well have persuaded us that inequality does indeed have a just and moral limit that should be actively guarded against.

In this process, we are required to engage in *reflective equilibrium.* First coined by Rawls, reflective equilibrium 'focuses on the relationship between *principles* and *judgements'* (Knight, 2017, p. 46). Our judgements are informed by our principles: 'one might say that justice as fairness is the hypothesis that the principles which would be chosen in the original position are identical with those that match our considered judgements and so these principles describe our sense of justice' (Rawls, 1999, p. 42). But of course, it is not as simple as a one-way street. Judgements can be subjected to 'certain irregularities and distortions' (Rawls, 1999, p. 42). By revisiting our principles, we can correct these pressures. However, sometimes our judgements may be so strong that they actually force us to revaluate our principles. It is in this to-ing and fro-ing between principles and judgement that we can see the aim of 'reflective equilibrium': to bring principles and judgements into accord' (Knight, 2017, p. 46). So, considering the 'murderer at the door', if I hold the principle that it is wrong to lie, but judge that in this instance it would not be wrong to, then I can 'reach equilibrium by revising either the principle or the judgement' (Knight, 2017, p. 46). A thought experiment is a good tool for bringing reflective equilibrium into play. In fact, it completely relies upon it: what would be the point of a thought experiment, whether it be to clarify, re-imagine, act as a counterexample or pump intuitions, if the target of the experiment had no inclination for reflective equilibrium?

So, if the thought experiment aims to defamiliarise us, it can also defamiliarise our held principles, challenged by our judgements within the thought experiment. Having said that, reflective equilibrium still emphasises the search for a *principles-first* approach to moral standards, thus, the need for an idealised search for those principles prior to application or challenge of them. What we see or witness may force us to question or revaluate those standards, but only to maintain their position as a guide to behaviour in the default. If we do not hold principles and a thought experiment is used it is to help us find principles, so they can inform our future judgements. Put simply, we are in search of consistency and our principles are the way of achieving that. They do not dictate to us and they can be affected by events in reality as much as competing principles, but we will never cease to try and make a place for them as our overarching moral guide: as the supposed starting point from which we ought to look upon events, actions and behaviours, and judge.

Upon examining these distinctions, we see that thought experiments are a common tool for ideal theory. In their 'mental visualization' there is a strong 'imaginative quality' for idealisation (Stemplowska & Brownlee, 2017, p. 25) which can be used to remove us from reality in order to perceive it differently when we are returned to it. The thought experiment often involves guiding us towards a principle to affect a change in behaviour. What all thought experiments thus share is the idea that through imaginary scenarios we will come to some clarification or discussion over the principles we hold, or indeed should hold.

Nonideal Criticisms – The Translation of Ideals and Principles Built upon Falsehoods

The justification for such simplification in theorising has sparked some criticisms. Idealising in a thought experiment may help us to discover the principle, but it makes more work for the supposed next step: the moment we, or social scientists, consider how it can be 'realized'. If this approach to a normative political theory is justifiable on the premise that it helps us get a more 'systematic grasp' on our 'more pressing problems' then is this not a contradiction? Much could be said about this, but Charles Mills makes a very stark observation that cuts straight to

the point. If ideal theory does indeed give us a 'systematic grasp' of our 'pressing problems', why have we not seen a wholesale change in focus in political theory in more recent years? When exactly, will this 'promised shift of theoretical attention' occur? (Mills, 2005, p. 179). He refers to the paucity of work on race in political philosophy as 'evasions' of ideal theory. This may seem an argument which overlooks disciplinary distinctions or a more conservative understanding of normative, but there is some credit to it when Mills reminds us that a *Theory of Justice* was written in 1971. From this we might think that political philosophers seem guilty of 'never producing arguments capable of truly convincing other political philosophers, let alone wider publics' (Floyd, 2011, p. 54), and so are mired and stuck in abstract discussion over the ideal principle. Worse, that this discussion, because of the nature of idealisations, is built on 'making claims that are actually false' (Farrelly, 2007, p. 848). Hence, the problem with transferring it over to societal constraints. Is the ideal *too much* of a 'mythical paradise island' that translating it across to our world is in fact a greater and more time-consuming task than we might have first thought? Even perhaps, that by overlooking social and historical contexts in its theorising ideal theory since Rawls has pushed a certain ideological perspective?

Mills certainly think so. He expands on idealisations as commonly employing five further assumptions on top of full compliance. First, an 'idealised social ontology of the modern type'. Here Mills argues that ideal theory always theorises from the starting point of 'equal atomic individuals' and by doing so, overlooks 'relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion and oppression' (Mills, 2005, p. 168). Seeing humans in this way is also a very limited understanding of their psychology and behaviour, and it reinforces liberal theory: we begin from the individual rather than the individual conceived within a community and its social relations. Second, idealisations result in generalising individuals into having 'idealized capacities'. Again, this is to overlook the effect of historical injustice, but the flaw runs deeper, for it also suspends the fact of human disability. We could argue that any theorising which fails

to take into account disabilities is a failed approach as these are a fact of biological life, not a product of an unjust society. They are, at present, totally unavoidable. It is not a variable one could argue may or may not be present. How can we simply idealize away such a human constant? By doing so, one abstracts away human biology: I do not think it is an exaggeration to say it is similar to abstracting away reproduction. Third, 'it follows from the focus of ideal theory that little or nothing will be said on actual historic oppression' (Mills, 2005, p. 168). This would be especially concerning when we consider our historic oppressions continue to have after-effects in our present societies, which connects us to the first point. Furthermore, it presumes that we need idealisations in order to produce ideal principles, which subsequently presumes that actual historic oppression cannot be an equal in the production of concepts of justice. In many ways, we might think that the non-violent action of the civil rights movement was an idealised vision of political resistance and wonder whether this is an example of how historical oppression informed its idealistic production. Fourth, we have mentioned idealised individuals and full compliance, but ideal theory also idealises social institutions. How a family is idealised, and so a perspective of it normalised, exposes how this simplification may well lead us to falsehoods in the principles we propose, especially when it comes to overlooking feminist arguments. Fifth, there will most likely be an 'idealized cognitive sphere'. In essence, if social oppression is idealised away, then so are the 'consequences *of* oppression' on the 'social cognition' of those subjected to it (Mills, 2005, p. 169). This does not mean it is the job of theory to investigate that cognition, this is where ethnographic studies are useful, but one should at least not theorise away the information that those studies have gifted us.

More criticisms are to be found than just what Mills has to tell us, however. Colin Farrelly raises the presumption of a 'cost-blind' approach to theorising. Here he has Rawls in mind as assuming that the 'rights entailed in the equal basic liberties principle' are '*costless* rights' (Farrelly, 2007, p. 849). We can see this as being an issue with full compliance theory,

for as Farrelly points out, ‘a significant portion of the government’s budget will need to be invested in protecting and promoting the first principle of justice’ (Farrelly, 2007, p. 850). But as he refers to ‘promoting’, Farrelly is claiming this is not just about the money spent on stopping people breaking laws but educating the populace in the value of the principle of justice and ensuring it is achieved. This raises the issue of competing costs which emerge from competing principles, which may not be highlighted or ranked in idealisations.

Raymond Geuss is equally antagonistic to ideal theory. For him it is the ‘systematic exclusion of sociology, real politics, and history in favour of an appeal to some kind of “normativity”’ which is conceived as ‘being contrasted’ to such sources of knowledge (Geuss, 2016, p. 6). He claims this is a mistake, for there is no such thing as ‘the purely normative’ and so no such thing as a purely separate normative theory. What we should do and how one ought to live ‘runs through all of human life’, so we cannot make a ‘fully autonomous, closed, fully rationally grounded’ realm that implies a better normative practice. When we imply this, normative theory is at once thought of as distinctive and through this distinction tries to find prescriptive action ‘for us in all important cases’ (Geuss, 2016, p. 23). In short, the realm of the normative is not a pure, idealised realm better equipped for discovering ideals of justice, for normative prescription pervades every aspect of life – and theory. It is in all types of political discussion, thus if it is not defined by a pure, idealised realm, our normative impulses are defined and informed by the contexts they emerge from or react to. Feminism for example, is normative theory in response to patriarchal oppression. We ought not say it is less pure in its normativity just because it emerges from closely examining the ‘contingencies’ of historical oppression. When ideal theory does this, it fails to recognise its ‘own political dimension’ (Geuss, 2016, p. 20).

The concern over some manner of reachable, pure normative realm is not just one we see from such harsh critics of ideal theory as Geuss. Amartya Sen distinguishes between a

‘transcendental’ approach to theorising justice and a ‘comparative approach’. The former is one he equates with Rawls but even claims it ‘can be traced at least to Thomas Hobbes’, where we are focussed on ‘identifying perfectly just societal arrangements’. The latter, we can understand as ‘ranking alternative societal arrangements’ (Sen, 2006, p. 216). The problem with the transcendental approach is in the difficulty we may face when having to compare competing principles of justice. For example, we may find that in helping to alleviate problem A, we exacerbate problem B. Idealisations may well mean that problem B has not been considered. Or we may have minimal resources to put into helping solve a problem, as Farrelly has emphasised. Thus, in reality, we need more work that compares and ranks normative values against each other: ‘Investigation of different ways of advancing justice in society (or in the world), or of reducing manifest injustices that may exist, demands comparative judgements about justice’ (Sen, 2006, p. 217)

Overall, the sticking point with ideal theory in method debates seems to be with presuming it is a practice where we can transfer ideals over to contextual guidance, action or policy: whether that be because idealisations make it impossible to transfer or because they are simply falsehoods. Geuss provides an example of how a lack of consideration for political realities can in fact become dangerous. He asks us to remember the political moment leading up to the Iraq war and parallels Tony Blair’s ‘moralizing intervention’ with ideal theory. Blair’s focus on the evil of Saddam Hussein was an ‘arbitrarily limited political vision’ which ‘cut short inquiry in several respects’. First, it ‘actively derailed discussion of the real situation in Iraq in all its complexity’. Furthermore, it ‘diverted attention’ from ‘a discussion of what Blair’s real motives might have been’, and finally, by ‘focussing on the individual moral attributes of the leaders in question’ it barred further necessary discussion over complexities such as ‘the institutional arrangements and the international context that constrained British foreign policy decisions at that time’ (Geuss, 2016, p. 41). This example shows the actual gap

that can exist between a political philosophy that ignores power and tries to reduce politics to moral decisions. In these critiques of ideal theory, we can see how 'abstracting away from realities crucial to our comprehension of the actual workings of injustice' is the reason why translating the ideal across to the reality becomes such a challenge, to the point where it 'will never be achieved' (Mills, 2005, p. 170), or worse in the case of this example, becomes something dangerous. Theorising away from the realities of a problem, when seen under this critical lens, appears to induce a stagnant limbo that cannot tell us what we should do when we return to the problem.

The Perspective of *Black Feminist Thought*

In the preface to the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought,* Patricia Hill Collins writes, 'Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group'. This has the danger of watering-down or even changing the 'meaning' of ideas and works to 'elevate the ideas of dominant groups' (Collins, 2000, p. vii). Inevitably, when such demands of language are placed on oppressed groups a split will occur: some will acquiesce, others will not. This leads to further problems of exclusion: the classic exception to the rule. Mainstream scholarship will tend to 'canonize a few' – those who chose to frame their language in the 'familiar' - as 'spokespersons of the group' and think the job done. This means mainstream scholars will most likely 'refuse to listen to any but these select few' (Collins, 2000, p. viii). This goes some way to 'Maintaining the invisibility' (Collins, 2000, p. 3) of ideas in these oppressed groups, as if this almost-silence is because of a lack of thought, not oppression or exclusion. Thus, when it comes to Black feminist thought, because 'elite white men control Western structures of knowledge validation', people of colour have had their experiences 'routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge' (Collins, 2000, p. 251). This is made worse by the historical (and present) conditions of Black women: 'The economic, political, and ideological dimensions of U.S. Black women's oppression supressed the

intellectual production of individual Black feminist thinkers' (Collins, 2000, p. 12). If a scholarly tone of voice and academic language use is part of intellectual communication, a tone of communication which was essentially formed and standardised by white males with the luxury to pontificate with most of their time, early Black feminist thinkers could not be considered intellectual. Today, Black feminist thinkers are left with a simple choice in the persistence of this appropriate 'academic' language, particularly in the history of political thought: adapt to the language of 'the dominant group' and risk their ideas being watered-down and other fellow writers being ignored, or do not adapt, and risk being ignored themselves. This formal language, with its 'distancing terms', presumes a 'detached observer' (Collins, 2000, p. 19). For Patricia Hill Collins and her framing of Black feminist thought, this is an ideological stance that precludes the specificity of the Black woman intellectual. What does this critique actually mean when it comes to the methods of ideal theory though?

Recently, marking a dissertation, I saw the second-marker's comment: that the student had done well to not fall into the trap of emotional language. Why is this a trap? It must be that emotional language betrays a partiality, a bias. Therefore, calm and measured language implies a neutrality, to some extent. Neutrality is a credential of the scholar for it makes whatever they produce more believable, more trustworthy. If we are looking for an answer to something, and not just an opinion, this is necessary. This means our measured, unemotional speech is directly tied to an epistemological belief: the priority and superiority of the 'detached observer' (Collins, 2000, p. 255) over the 'situated knower' (Collins, 2000, p. 19). The former is a desirable quality. It is the faceless, universal scholar. It is Kant's categorical imperative: 'Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law' (Kant, 2002, p. 37). This demands that we take our own experiences as bias and therefore morally corrupting. If a universal moral imperative is to be found, it is through thinking things like 'I should not steal because if everyone stole, I could not exist in that world',

rather than ‘I am hungry, so I will steal’. Of course, if everyone was obeying the second categorical imperative, that ‘every rational being, *exists* as end in itself, *not merely as means* to the discretionary use of this or that will’ (Kant, 2002, p. 45), one could argue you would not be hungry in the first place, but such a defence speaks very little to Black feminist experiences of the world.

Such language betrays a commitment to ‘Positivist approaches’, which Patricia Hill Collins tells us in the chapter entitled *Black Feminist Epistemology,* ‘aim to create scientific descriptions of reality by producing objective generalizations’. The issue with us as scholars is, we will have ‘widely differing values, experiences, and emotions’, and so we must engage in ‘decontextualizing’ ourselves in order for our research to be more trusted. Thus, we must become ‘detached observers’ (Collins, 2000, p. 255) and not too much of a ‘participant’ (Collins, 2000, p. 19) in our area of study. However, she begins *Black Feminist Thought* by clearly denouncing the typical scholarly tone for the presumed neutrality it represents: ‘I reject the pronouns “they” and “their” when describing U.S. Black women and our ideas and replace these terms with “we”, “us”, and “our”. She calls the former pronouns ‘distancing terms’ and wants to challenge this by using words that assert her ‘position as a participant in and observer of Black women’s communities’ (Collins, 2000, p. 19). There is a recognition here that she might ‘run the risk of being discredited as being too subjective and hence less scholarly’, but instead of letting that concern stall her, she seizes on it as a point of attack. This is what she means when she says the interests of elite white men have inevitably pervaded the ‘themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship’ and ‘knowledge validation’ (Collins, 2000, p. 251). Social contract and state of nature theories are a good way to exemplify this. The idea that we would need an officialised entity to recognise and protect our property rights is usually explained and justified in the abstract or a thought experiment. When state legitimacy and a monopoly of violence is scrutinised as an historical question though, the case often

becomes weaker. Who would presume to reply to the question of legitimacy in the abstract, in a way that presents the state as some kind of neutral arbiter, but a group who generally have experienced the existence of the state as a neutrality, towards them? What contractarians do when they presume this, is in fact present a very specific experience of the state – white male experiencing the state as neutral arbiter – as a universal feature of a state. Aborigines, Native Americans, and African Americans would not begin their abstractions with that presumption[1]. The 'detached' language emerges from the idea of abstract 'detachment'.

So, Black feminist thought has been excluded because under this framework it will inevitably be seen as too partial and too emotional, implied by the fact that it is written in a tone that is not scholarly enough. But more than this, we should not and cannot demand Black women try to attain the position of 'detached observer'. This is the burden of being a Black feminist in academia – one cannot simply be a theorist, but is also an activist, because by producing knowledge that has been, and is, excluded because of discrimination and knowledge power structures, the very act of contributing that knowledge is an activist act. One is a participant, a 'situated knower' (Collins, 2000, p. 19) by default. If our knowledge validation structures persist in demanding we speak in a 'scholarly tone' to reinforce our epistemological status as the 'detached observer', it is not the 'tone' of Black feminist thought that needs to adapt, but our knowledge validation structures and the 'detached observer' methods they prioritise. What we attempt in ideal theory is a normative truth that should be true regardless of our specific position in society, hence we idealise in our thought experiments. However, when we do this, we relegate the 'situated knower', a key voice in Black feminist thought. When we do ideal theory and reinforce the ideal of the 'detached observer', we are in fact reinforcing an epistemology of white privilege. This is not a universal, faceless scholar, but a

[1] Charles Mills does an excellent routine on this: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yfz20ZhOw4Y

very specific location in history and contemporary society. This means that when we say we have idealised away contextual bias and found a guiding principle, we are in fact not recognising our own cognition: the ideology of the 'detached observer'. Essentially, when Charles Mills claims that idealised thought experiments idealise away the 'consequences *of* oppression' on the 'social cognition' of those subjected to it (Mills, 2005, p. 169), we should also consider if they idealise away the consequences on the social cognition of being those who have historically *not* been subjected to oppression.

Conclusion - Epilogue Storytelling

So, the issues that have been highlighted with ideal theorising are:

1. There is a significant difficulty of translating fantastical principles theorised from idealised thought experiments into the reality of life. It can even lead to falsehoods.
2. Idealised thought experiments presume some kind of impartial or 'detached observer' which is not only questionable, but potentially racially exclusive.

We therefore need to modify our ideal theorising. With the latter issue, we need an approach that can recognise the specific location of a 'detached observer' without throwing the baby out with the bath water, to coin a phrase. It may be a specific location, but on that reasoning all perspectives are. Hence, we do not need to eradicate this perspective. We just need to stop presuming, through our language and methods, that it is the only correct viewpoint, and so the universal scholarly aspiration. Patricia Hill Collins recognises this as truths with 'partial perspectives'. This is not relativism, there is a truth, we just stand in different places when we observe it and say what we think it is: 'Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives' (Collins, 2000, p. 270). A 'detached observer' is a particular trained academic gaze from a particular school of thought, but that does not mean one cannot

recognise it as a partial view in itself, or even another form of situated knowing. In other words, it is important that we do not presume it is solely because of our political theory methods as 'neutral decision procedure' (Rorty, 2007, p. 143). This is not a contradiction. One can be *educated* in methods which encourage us to step away from bias, and so believe themselves to be in some way closer to a moral truth, yet still recognise that this belief comes from a specific experience of academic culture and realise that this experience also affects social cognition. I do believe I am better at searching for moral truisms or normative imperatives, and so better at being less bias, than I was prior to completing a political philosophy PhD. However, I also recognise this improvement, as a white male theorist in training, also produced a specific position or way of analysing. It can be a useful perspective to have *alongside* other situated perspectives, not in dominance over them, or some kind of correcting gaze. Thus, I recognise the effectiveness of my specific training experience, without needing to colonise other forms of knowing.

With the former issue of translating ideals, we need to find a way to understand how our first principles may work in some kind of 'realistic' context. The quotation marks here are important. 'Realistic' is a sliding scale. We are indeed not social scientists or ethnographers. Discussion over principles is generally long and arduous and full of self-reflection. To be blunt, it is time-consuming. But we do need to consider how any principle we come up with could be implemented, or at least, what *a* world would look like if it was. Its likelihood is surely part of its normative force. The reticence to engage with this approach, I think, is because traditionally this has been done in extremes: utopia. However, we can explore fantastical worlds that are 'psychologically realistic' (Frazer, 2017, p. 104): meaning that the setting does not have to be a real place, but the people themselves must be believable and representative, otherwise their moral reactions are unlikely to invoke anything in the reader. What would, for example, John Rawls principles of justice look like in a culture where the people prized community or

indigenous rights as opposed to one that praised atomic individual rights? What would be the effects of Kant's first categorical imperative in a generally well-off society full of affluent characters as opposed to one populated with people suffering from poverty and crime? To repeat: these do not have to be real places, but they do have to have believable workings and believable characters. This is a kind of post-principle, extended thought experiment in a realistic setting, with believable characters, or, to be more precise, a short epilogue story. Essentially, we can test the principles we have argued for and show a reader what we think those principles would do, even what structures they would create and behaviours they would encourage, in this 'realistic setting'.

This, if nothing else, would make our work more rigorous. We would effectively engage in reflective equilibrium. Imagine I have written a principles-first piece about the absoluteness of freedom of speech. I then test my commitment to this fully, by presenting a world not so far on from our own, where certain speech is inciting attacks on a daily basis. I consider both those performing the attacks and those receiving them. This imagined world forces me to not only consider my commitment to the principle, but whether or not it is a principle that can truly be removed from its context. Perhaps this is not a first principle at all? Perhaps it is only something we can apply in certain times and contexts.

If *Epilogue storytelling* is a short story at the end of an article or book, it is therefore a replacement for, or simply a different way of writing a conclusion, showing the principle you argued for in a particular setting. This gives us some retrospective focus to our normative principles – the author can clearly indicate a specific problem or target – without necessarily giving up on the idea that it might be a universal principle (as far as one can be). This could encourage interesting counter-responses where another theorist could write a different epilogue story, using the same principle, in a setting where it would behave less flattering. In short, a

storytelling epilogue is an approach that says: 'here is what the principle of xyz would do in a world that looked like this…'.

The flexibility of such an approach is considerable. Perhaps the most obvious use would be for moral sentimentalism. In *A Defense of Minimalist Liberalism,* Richard Rorty writes: 'I reject the Kantian suggestion that sentiment is too low down on the scale of human faculties to impose moral obligations. I entirely agree that we have obligations which spring from solidarity, but I think that solidarity is created by educating our sentiments' (Rorty, 1998, p. 121). This approach begets a political theory that describes, imagines and evaluates people's experiences: an argument of 'this is what it is like to be in her situation' rather than one over independent principles (Rorty, 1998, p. 185). This does not mean there is a lack of grounding for the 'right' normative choice, only that it is found not solely in rationality, but moral sentiments. This gives us something capable of normative prescription and an approach that couples with immersion: empathy is a strong form of immersion. Thus, as 'all evaluation contains an affective component, sentimentalist theory cannot be consistently normative without being impassioned' (Frazer, 2017, p. 95). This may well cause issues with objectivity, but as Frazer argues, 'it is no more despotic, coercive or manipulative for members of a political community to share emotions with one another than it is for them to provide rational arguments to one another' (Frazer, 2017, p. 99). With this then, a sentimentalist normative guidance prioritises a storytelling approach rather than an analytical one based upon finding truths purged of emotion: 'Sentimentalist theory should be filled with interesting stories, ones in which we sympathetically engage with the characters, allowing their needs and interests to become our own' (Frazer, 2017, pp. 100-101). But in this, sentimentalists should 'refrain from telling their readers how to feel, letting their stories speak for themselves' (Frazer, 2017, p. 101). Thus, in telling a story, objections to our narrative should be considered so we do not 'fail to capture the experience of others' (Frazer, 2017, p. 103). As moral knowledge also

equates to understanding and feeling what others feel, then to have a narrow capture of experience would be to deny important moral knowledge that we need to decide what is right. But also for me, this is doubly important, for in my opinion the impassioned writing that moral sentimentalism requires should be tempered by the 'open-endedness' we see in realism - its 'indeterminacy', or 'agnosticism about absolute and categorical claims' (Geuss, 2016, p. 33)', especially when 'groups with radically different experiences of a given situation are in conflict' (Frazer, 2017, p. 104). Multiple characters therefore function a little like opponents in a Socratic dialogue, where character's thoughts and opinions are like Socrates' opponents continually pressing their 'objections' (Bell, 1993, p. 21).

So, there is a clear connection between moral sentimentalism with its focus on empathy and a storytelling epilogue for normative theorising. To quote Rorty, 'The answer to Nozick is not Aristotle or Augustine or Kant, but, for example, the writings of William Julius Wilson, and the autobiographies of kids who grew up in urban ghettos' (Rorty, 1998, p. 121). However, this need not be the only approach or purpose to epilogue storytelling. It is not simply for evoking sympathy. Perhaps the purpose of one story is to expose institutions of power or to present utilitarian options, where empathy is not at the forefront of the narrative. Perhaps it is simply to provide vicarious, alternative experiences to reframe the way we think about a problem, functioning very much in the same manner as a thought experiment.

The point is, a storytelling epilogue forces us to consider how our *idealised principle* would work in some kind of reality or more *realistically constructed world*. It also forces us to realise our own *specific location* as the storyteller. Thus, *if* we are presenting as a *'detached observer'*, when we tell the epilogue story, with characters specifically located, they stare back at us and we recognise the specific privilege of our own position as that detached, moralising storyteller. Hence, in a method which recognises our own location, even if we are presenting

as detached or impartial, it does not relegate 'situated knowers', or, situated storytellers, on the premise that they are too bias – they simply have a different location in telling the story.

Word Count and Date

7193 24/07/19

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